

THE DIRECTOR OF
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NOTE FOR THE DIRECTOR

FROM: Herbert E. Meyer
Vice Chairman, NIC

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THE GORBACHOV OFFER

The detailed Soviet offer for missile reduction announced yesterday in Paris by Mr Gorbachov has been expected in Washington for months. It finally crystallizes the principal differences on the theory of arms control which now divide East and West. The purpose of arms control is to achieve greater stability from which should grow a greater sense of security on both sides. The objective of arms control is thus not automatically achieved by arms reductions unless those reductions are so great that they create a changed strategic environment. The Gorbachov offer will not do that, whereas the prospect for introducing some element of strategic defence into the line-up of purely offensive weapons certainly would.

There is no need to go into the missile arithmetic with great detail for it to remain clear that at the end of the proposed programme of missile reductions the imbalance between American and Soviet armouries expressly designed to destroy each other's missiles would remain as marked as it is now. The Soviet Union has roughly 6,000 warheads designed and targetted as a "counter-force" which is dispersed widely throughout the Soviet landmass. The United States have about 2,100 counter-force warheads. Counter-force weapons need greater accuracy in order to be targetted on the adversary's weapons systems

and thus to cripple his capacity to retaliate after being the victim of an attack.

A reduction of weapons in this category would thus preserve the Soviet margin of superiority without any enhancement of stability between East and West. Certainly such a reduction would release resources for other uses in the economy and, given Mr Gorbachov's desperate need to resuscitate some of his economic disaster areas, it is not surprising that his offer points this way.

However as Washington expected, the immediate attractions of missile reductions are accompanied by the familiar Soviet demand that the United States should discontinue research into strategic defence. We do not yet in the West know whether the strategic defence research will be successful. But we do know that without any strategic defence we will continue to suffer from the nuclear instability caused by having no defences, only retaliatory forces. Mr Gorbachov is in a different position since he has 20 years of research into strategic defence behind him. Presumably he therefore knows its potential as well as its cost which is why he persists with his demand that the United States should stop work on it while he continues with his own.

With some element of strategic defence in the line-up of weapons the threat of either side

suffering from a surprise attack by the other would be much diminished. For a start the attractions of offensive missiles would lessen the moment there was a doubt - even if only a partial doubt - as to their ability to get through. Secondly such doubts would soon affect the cost/benefit calculation applied to offensive weapons. Thirdly the psychological erosion of the people's sense of security, which has been declining for the past decade or so, would be mitigated by the knowledge that at least we had some defences against attack. Imagine the West's position, however, if the United States abandoned strategic defence research and left the field free to the Soviet Union to do what it liked. Our retaliatory forces would soon lose what credibility they now have.

Reaction to the Soviet offer at Geneva should thus be to give a welcome to any real sign of a proportionate reduction in each side's weapons inventory without allowing the Soviet superiority to become permanent. That should be coupled with a continuing and unambiguous determination to persist with strategic defence. We know that the Soviet ploy is to dangle apparently tempting offers to the Europeans so as to cause an Atlantic gap within the Alliance. With the possible exception of President Mitterrand, the Europeans should be too wise by now to be taken in.